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## Bill pushes for World War II POW rights

### Rep. Dana Rohrabacher says some major Japanese companies owe vets used for slave labor during the war.

By Paul Clinton  
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COSTA MESA -- A local congressman is fighting for reparations for World War II veterans who were mistreated and exploited for slave labor in the factories of several Japanese companies.

Hearings were held Wednesday on a bill sponsored by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher that would allow the veterans to file claims against the companies that enslaved them. Several of the veterans spoke before a House Judiciary sub-committee urging lawmakers to adopt the measure.

"These American veterans have been denied the right to sue their torturers," Rohrabacher said during the hearing. "The guilty parties, by the way, are now some of the world's top corporations."

Rohrabacher singled out Mitsui Mining Co., Hitachi Shipbuilding, Kawasaki Heavy Industries and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries as corporations that should be held accountable for mistreatment of POWs.

About 30,000 American soldiers, captured when the Japanese raised their flags over the Pacific islands of Corregidor and Bataan during the spring of 1942, were forced to work for these companies during the war. Many were a part of the Bataan Death March.

Slightly more than 3,000 of these men are still alive. The nonprofit advocacy group Justice for Veterans has pressed for an apology from the Japanese companies.

"What they're looking for is an apology for these atrocities, for these companies to own up to what they did," said Brett Ethridge, a spokesman for the veterans. "That's the goal, to put pressure on them to come clean."

A group of about 5,000 men, led by Dr. Lester Tenney, who shoveled coal 28 days a month for three years for Mitsui, filed a suit against the companies in 1999. In his testimony Wednesday, Tenney said he wasn't paid and was brutalized by company officials. He said his teeth were knocked out, his back was broken and his shoulder was smashed during his enslavement.

However, the veterans' suit has been stalled by the U.S. State and Justice departments, which say that a 1951 treaty between the U.S. and Japan waives the rights of the men to be compensated for the acts.

The Treaty of Peace with Japan, as it is known, lets the companies off the hook because the U.S. government seized Japanese assets after the country's surrender to pay POWs for their mistreatment. Some payments have been made, Ethridge said.

On Oct. 19, 2001, Orange County Superior Court Judge William F. McDonald, who was assigned the case, ruled that the veterans were entitled to the claims.

While American veterans from the Pacific Theater haven't been compensated for their suffering, POWs who were captured and tortured in Europe have received some payments from German companies.

Also, the Japanese government has entered into settlement agreements with the Netherlands, North Korea and China for mistreatment of POWs from those countries.

"The hypocrisy of Japan's position toward American veterans was exposed last week," Rohrabacher said, "when the Japanese government offered to pay billions of dollars in aid and indirect war reparations to North Korea, a totalitarian country that admitted to kidnapping and causing the deaths of private Japanese citizens."

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